



Southeast Louisiana Refuges Complex

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Winter 2003-04 Newsletter and Calendar of Events

Comprehensive Conservation Plan Public Meeting held Nov. 13

Forty-seven area residents interested in the future of Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge attended a public meeting held on Nov. 13 at Southeast LA Refuges headquarters. Both staff members and the public seemed to agree that the meeting was successful and yielded much constructive input as the refuge's CCP process continues.

Following an introduction by Project Leader Liz Souheaver in which the CCP process was outlined, guests were invited to visit any or all of three subject area "stations" at which comments were taken and recorded. The station subjects were: public programs and visitor facilities, refuge administration, and wildlife and habitat management. Displays and detailed refuge maps at each station helped to facilitate and guide discussion.

Thoughtful and informed comments and suggestions were received in virtually all areas of refuge management, with the "public programs" station having the greatest overall attendance. The comments received will be provided to participants and incorporated into discussions as the CCP process continues with a Vision and Goal-Setting Workshop to be held in December.

A scene on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico



Southeast Louisiana Refuges Officers on Island Detail

The four full-time law enforcement officers of SE Louisiana Refuges have each done 2-week details at Vieques National Wildlife Refuge in Puerto Rico, providing an exotic counterpoint to their usual refuge duties. On April 30, 2003 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took possession of lands located on Vieques Island, Puerto Rico. The new refuge did not have the law enforcement personnel to adequately protect the resources or the visiting public, so more than 100 volunteer refuge officers from the Service have spent two weeks working on the refuge on revolving assignments.

Sound like a vacation? Consider this.....Since the early 1950s, the U.S. Navy used parts of the island as a bombing range for fighter planes, helicopters, and naval ships. The local inhabitants worked for many years to have the U.S. Navy vacate the island. When Congress agreed to move the naval operations, it gave the majority of the Federal lands to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be managed as a refuge. Needless to say, the people that worked to move the Navy were not happy to have another Federal bureau take its place, and adjacent "protest camps" set up during the Navy's tenure have continued to be occupied by locals unhappy with the USFWS presence.

The refuge is open to the public during daylight hours and the majority of public use takes place on the beaches. There are

many closed areas on the refuge, since the Navy left without cleaning and clearing the bombing ranges. This presents quite a public safety issue, with unexploded ordinance lying on the ground or buried out of sight, so special access conditions exist for sections of the refuge.

Problems that have been experienced on the refuge include: vandalism, theft, litter, DWI, assault, trespass in closed areas, illegal construction and burglary. Officers were also tasked with compliance checks for dove hunters that frequently hunt adjacent to the refuge.

Despite the problems, at least a couple of our officers are thinking of re-upping for another detail!

Makin' Hay at Bayou Sauvage

With the assistance of staff and volunteers, another 175 hay bales were placed in Blind Lagoon marsh as part of a marsh restoration project. The hay bales were transported by pontoon boat and then airboat to their final resting place in the shallow waters of the refuge. This is a trial to see if organic materials can be used as a substrate for the formation of emergent marsh.

Wetlands Conservation Award Winners Cited for Wetlands Restoration in Coastal Louisiana

We were happy to be able to recognize the two recipients of Regional National Wetlands Conservation Awards for 2002 during our annual Wild Things festival on October 18. As it happens, both were cited for their work in Louisiana: Chad Courville of the Ducks Unlimited Louisiana South Office in Lafayette and Entergy Corporation in New Orleans. Elizabeth Souheaver, project leader of Southeast Louisiana Refuges, announced the awards during Wild Things, a community event at Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana.

"We are very proud of the accomplishments that both Chad Courville of Ducks Unlimited and Entergy Corporation have achieved," said Sam D. Hamilton, the Service's Southeast Regional Director. "Their efforts are conserving and restoring wetlands in coastal Louisiana, which has had the

highest coastal wetlands loss in the nation."

As project officer for Ducks Unlimited, Courville is responsible for coordinating and securing grant funding for large-scale wetlands restoration projects that impact migratory birds. Ducks Unlimited, through Courville and other staff, works with local coastal advisory groups to nominate and put projects together for Breaux Act, and National American Wetlands Conservation Act funding, as well as funding from other sources.

By February 2003, Courville and Ducks Unlimited, with the help of many partners, restored or enhanced more than 62,566 acres of marsh by terrace construction and planting, structure installation, and levee repair. About 340 acres were restored to moist soil wetland habitat, and 8,000 acres of agricultural land was enhanced as seasonal wetland.

Chad Courville, Wetland Award Winner

"It is an honor to receive this award and an honor



to work for an organization like Ducks Unlimited which allows staff like myself to conserve, restore, and manage habitat for North America's waterfowl," said Courville.

Entergy Corporation was honored as Southeast Regional Runner-up for the 2002 National Wetlands Conservation Award. Partnering with the Conservation Fund, Entergy Corporation purchased 600 acres of farmland in the Red River floodplain of Natchitoches Parish and replanted it with bottomland hardwood trees. The land was then donated to the Service to establish the Red River National Wildlife Refuge.

Getting Ready for Breton National Wildlife Refuge's 100th Anniversary

Plans are already in the works to observe the Centennial of the second-oldest refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge System! Breton NWR, located on the Chandeleur Island chain off the Louisiana coast, was established in October 1904, second only to Florida's Pelican Island in age.

Some of the projects being considered are a traveling display about Breton and its history, an exhibit of artwork done on Breton by artist Walter Anderson early in his career, a new full-color brochure for the refuge, and special commemorative activities on the islands to coincide with the October birthday of the refuge.

By the turn of the century the nation had witnessed the near extinction of the bison, increasing devastation of wading bird populations by plume hunters in Florida, and severe reductions in the populations of other once abundant forms of wildlife such as the passenger pigeon. Public support increased for more vigorous actions on the part of the government to reverse this



downward slide. Such public concern, combined with the conservation-minded President Roosevelt, resulted in the initial Federal land specifically set aside for a non-marketable form of wildlife (the brown pelican) when 3-acre Pelican Island was proclaimed a Federal Bird Reservation in 1903. Thus, it is said to be the first bona fide "refuge."

Following the modest trend begun with Pelican Island, many other islands and parcels of land and water were quickly dedicated for the protection of various species of colonial nesting birds that were being destroyed for their plumes and other feathers. Such refuge areas included Breton, Louisiana (1904), Passage Key, Florida (1905), Shell Keys, Louisiana (1907), and Key

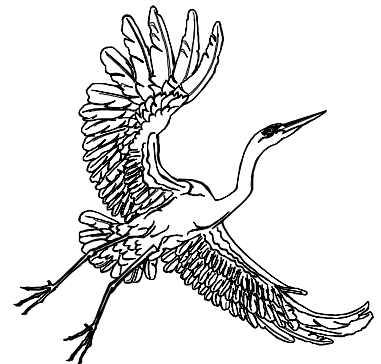
West, Florida (1908).

Breton has been important in recent recovery efforts related to the brown pelican, an endangered species, and serves as one of the most important nesting areas for the birds on the Gulf Coast. Biologists have implemented banding programs to track the bird's movements from Breton to areas around the Gulf and as far as Central America. The refuge also serves as an important wintering area for the endangered piping plover.

Birding Heating Up at Bayou Sauvage

As the weather finally cools, birding opportunities are heating up at Bayou Sauvage. Dry conditions in recent weeks have lowered water levels and exposed grass beds and other food sources, attracting large numbers of ducks, wading, and shore birds. Large flocks of white pelicans have been seen on the refuge lately, and the uncommon black-bellied whistling duck, discovered nesting on the refuge this summer, is still present.

Good spots from which to watch the show are areas along Hwy 11 in the refuge interior (be cautious about pulling completely off the road), and the area near the old Recovery One landfill. The reach this you can park at the Ridge Trail area on Hwy 90, then carefully cross the highway and walk about ½ mile down the gated road that heads south. You'll cross the RR tracks, go past the now-closed landfill and up onto the levee for views out over the marsh. If you're quiet as you ascend the levee, you may be rewarded with a waterfowl spectacle not often seen!



Louisiana Statewide Waterfowl Surveys

Wildlife Biologist James Harris is coordinating with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) to expand waterfowl surveys statewide and then provide the information to the Louisiana public in a timely manner. Of our area National Wildlife Refuges, Bayou Sauvage, Big Branch Marsh, and Delta NWR's will be included in the survey areas. LDWF and USFWS will conduct aerial

and ground waterfowl surveys biweekly from November through January of the coastal zone, Catahoula Lake, and wetland complexes in the central and northern parishes. Bag checks will be conducted twice weekly to determine hunter success rates.

In addition to waterfowl population estimates, timely information will be included on local habitat conditions, weather patterns, waterfowl migration events and results of recent hunting at WMAs and NWRs. This information will be posted at the LDWF's website <http://www.wlf.state.la.us>, then to "Hunting Information."

Go Take a Hike!

Good advice at this time of year. The bugs are mostly gone, the breeze is fresh, and fall is in the air. Aside from being great exercise, hiking is one of the best ways to see wildlife and enjoy the scenery of area National Wildlife Refuges.

Boy Scout Road - Big Branch Marsh

You can do a 4.5 mile round trip on this smooth gravel road, and probably not see another person. No cars, either, since it's closed to auto traffic. There are interpretive signs along the way, and a booklet that will fill you in on wildlife and on habitat management activities that occur in the area. There are views of pine flatwoods, open marsh, cypress sloughs, and Bayou Lacombe.

To reach this trail from I-12, Take Exit #74 at Lacombe (Hwy 434) and go South to Hwy 190. Turn left (east), go 2.3 miles. Take a right on Transmitter Rd. Go 2 miles until you come to a T intersection. Turn right at the T and go 1 mile. Take a left at the Big Branch Marsh/Boy Scout Road signs. There's also a short boardwalk here

for the less energetic.

As hunting is allowed on Big Branch, wear hunter orange if you visit during hunt hours/days.

Ridge Trail - Bayou Sauvage

This woodsy boardwalk affords a view of a bottomland hardwood forest, mixed with palmetto, that extends along the natural ridge created by the Bayou Sauvage waterway, a former distributary of the Mississippi River. Along the way the walk emerges into the open for a glimpse of the more typical marsh habitat of the refuge. The loop walk is about 2/3 of a mile. There are restrooms and a pavilion with tables at the site. There is no hunting allowed at Bayou Sauvage.

From Slidell: Take I-10 West toward New Orleans. Exit at Hwy 11, exit 254, and go left onto U.S. 11. Follow U.S. 11 south for five miles, until it ends at U.S. 90 (Chef Menteur Highway). Turn right and go about two miles. Watch for the wooden Ridge Trail sign on the right.

From New Orleans: Take I-10 East to exit 246A (Chalmette, I-510). Go south about one mile on I-510, then exit at Highway 90 (Chef Menteur Hwy.) Go left on Hwy 90 for about 3.8 miles. Watch for the wooden Ridge Trail sign on the left.

